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The Sinfulness of indulging our Curiosity  
in hearing the Word of God.

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A CIRCULATORY

L E T T E R

ADDRESSED TO THE

ASSOCIATED CHURCHES

OF CHRISTIANS

CALLLED



INDEPENDENTS,

IN THE COUNTY OF KENT.

To which is prefixed,

THE MINUTES OF THE SAID ASSOCIATION.

**I**N a day of abounding error, infidelity, and profaneness, when combinations of men greatly promote the diffusion, and increase the strength of these evils, it is incumbent on the ministers and friends of truth and religion; to counteract them by every mean in their ability.

To add weight, respectability and energy, to truths of divine revelation; to countenance and encourage the profession of them; and to stimulate the different churches of Christ, in their adherence to them, are some of the advantages resulting from the communion and association of Christian societies, of the same faith and practice.

Such periodical meetings of ministers, and their people, are now almost universal in the different counties of this kingdom.

kingdom : and the divine presence attending them ; the mutual interchange of Christian love and affection ; the confluence of prayers ; and the assistance of spiritual advice, with many other advantages, are a strong demonstration of their divine origin.

The consideration of these things, induced some ministers of the independent persuasion, convened to assist at the ordination of Mr. *Christopher Muston*, August the 8th, 1792, at *Milton*, to establish an annual association, in the county of *Kent*, in imitation of that in use amongst our Baptist brethren, with a view to open a correspondence with our respective churches, and to propagate the cause of truth and religion in this dark county ; accordingly it was then agreed, by Mr. *Ralph*, of *Maidstone* ; Mr. *Townsend*, of *Ramsgate* ; Mr. *Cracherode*, of *Gravesend* ; Mr. *Hopkins*, of *Tunbridge* ; Mr. *Muston*, of *Milton* ; Mr. *Leggett*, of *Strood* ; to form ourselves into an association, and that the first association should be held the second *Wednesday* in *June*, 1793, at Mr. *Townsend's* meeting, *Ramsgate*.

Brother *Leggett*, *Strood*, to preach in the morning, upon the Excellency and Utility of the Gospel ministry.

Brother *Cracherode* in the evening, upon the effects the Gospel produces, when it is savingly received.

And that we should meet at a throne of grace, every Saturday at half past 12 o'clock, to pray for the spread of the gospel, and civil and religious liberty, during the present troubles.

*June 12, 1793*, the ministers of the associated churches, and others, assembled at *Ramsgate* : Morning service began at a quarter before 11. Brother *Muston* opened the service with reading and prayer. Brother *Ralph* prayed the long prayer. Brother *Leggett* preached from *Romans* i. former part of the 16 verse. Brother *Hopkins* concluded in prayer.—Evening service began at 6 o'clock. Brother *Winter*, of *London*, prayed. Brother *Cracherode* preached from *Acts* xi. 21. Brother *James Parnel*, of *Canterbury*, concluded in prayer.

Agreed to hold the next association at *Maidstone*, second *Wednesday*, in *June*, 1794. Brother *Townsend* to preach in the morning, on the subject of Sanctification. Brother *Hopkins* in the evening, on the subject of The Saints final Perse-

Perseverance. In case of failure, Brother *James Parnel*, and Brother *Muston*.

And that some rules should be drawn up and presented to the associated brethren, for their revival and approbation; for our order and regularity.

On the second *Wednesday* in *June*, 1794, we met at Brother *Ralph's*, at *Maidstone*.

At half past ten the service began. Brother *Leggett* of *Strood*, opened the service of the day, with an introductory prayer, and read *Isa. lii.* and 12th chap. of the 1st Ep. to *Cor.* Brother *Townsend* preached from 2 *Theff.* chap. ii. 13 ver last clause. Brother *Goodwin*, of *Lenham*, concluded in prayer.

In the evening at 6 o'clock, Brother *Cracherode* prayed. Brother *Hopkins* preached from *Matt. xxiv. 13.* And Brother *Pilcher* concluded in prayer.

Agreed to hold the next meeting at *Strood*, on the second *Wednesday* in *June*, 1795.

Brother *Ralph* to preach in the morning, on the subject of the Nature and Spirit of Adoption.

Brother *Townsend* in the evening, on the subject of Justification.

In case of a failure, Brother *Hopkins*. And that Brother *Leggett* draw up a circulatory letter, on the Sinfulness of indulging our Curiosity in hearing of the Word.

At this meeting, the rules which had been agreed to be drawn up, were presented to the associated Brethren, were revised, approved of, and the secretary desired to transcribe them and the minutes in a book.

On the second *Wednesday* in *June*, 1795, we met at Brother *Leggett's*, at *Strood*.

Brother *Muston*, of *Aston*, prayed, and read before the sermon. Brother *Ralph* preached from 1 *Joh. iii. 1.* Brother *Cracherode* concluded in prayer.

In the evening at half past six, service began again; Brother *Slattery*, of *Chatham*, prayed. Brother *Townsend* preached from *Romans v. 18.* last clause. And Brother *Busfoy*, of *Town Sutton*, concluded in prayer.



Brother *Buck*, of *Sheerness*, preached the evening before from 2 Tim, i. 12.

At this meeting, Brother *Buck*, of *Sheerness*, Brother *Slattery*, of *Chatham*, Brother *Goodwin*, of *Lenham*, and Brother *Busby*, of *Town Sutton*, signified their intention to join the association, with the consent of their respective churches.

A letter was read from the committee appointed by an association of ministers in *London*, for the propagation of the gospel among the Heathen.

Agreed, that Brother *Townsend* and Brother *Ralph* be appointed our delegates, to the intended general meeting in *London*, or elsewhere, for promoting the glorious design of sending missionaries among the Heathen.

Agreed, with consent of our churches, to set apart a monthly meeting for prayer, for the success of this benevolent undertaking.

That the delegates appointed by this association, to meet the general meeting in *London*, be desired to draw up a circulatory letter, to be sent to the different churches in *Kent*, to excite their zeal and assistance in this work.

The time of prayer for the spread of the gospel, and civil and religious liberty, at half past 12 on Saturday, having been found inconvenient to some of our Brethren, we agreed to change it to half past three on the same day.

That the next annual association be held at *Gravesend* the second *Wednesday* in *June*, 1796.

Brother *Slattery* to preach the evening before, on the Sanctification of the Lord's Day.

Brother *Hopkins* to preach in the morning on the Nature and Evidences of Christian Zeal.

Brother *Muston* in the evening, on the subject of Love to the Brethren.

In case of failure, Brothers *Leggett* and *Busby*.

And that Brother *Cracherode* draw up the circulatory letter, upon the most profitable method of hearing the word of God.

The circulatory letter on the Sinfulness of indulging our Curiosity in hearing the Word was read, approved of,



of, and requested to be printed, with the minutes; and the profits arising from the sale of it, to be expended on some charitable design.

And we have reason to adore the great Head of the Church, that the numbers who attend these annual meetings; the union and affection that prevail amongst ourselves; the growing zeal and energy manifest at these opportunities, afford us comfortable prospects, that they will be a future blessing to our churches, and the mean of spreading Christian love and affection into other parts of this populous county. *Even so. Amen.*

*To*

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*To the Churches of Christ meeting at Ramsgate, Maidstone, Strood, Gravesend, Tunbridge, Sheerness, Chatham, Town Sutton, and Lenham.*

Dear Brethren,

THAT there exists in the present day among professors, a mis-application of the ordinance of hearing the word of God, is too evident. It is matter of complaint to pious ministers and christians, many professors are irregular in their attendance on the preaching of the gospel; the external circumstances of this ordinance have more weight with them, than the great end and design of it:—The person of the preacher, his stile, manner of address, peculiar phraseology, and quaintness of expression, have more attractive influence to draw them under the word than the consideration, that it is the word of God, and that his blessing alone can make it effectual to salvation. Of such we have mournful reason to complain, that they receive it not as the word of God, but as the word of man; and the conversation turns less upon the excellency, preciousness, and suitableness of what they have heard, than upon the ability and manner of the instrument. Such a kind of hearing, is a sinful curiosity, and bears too near an affinity to that diversion of the carnal world, whose attention to any object must be supported by novelty. The Corinthians fell early into the same evil; which the Apostle imputes to the carnality of the human heart. *1 Cor. iii. 4.*

Suffer us, therefore, dear Brethren, to lay before you the nature and evil of such a temper of mind, such a frivolous use of sacred things; and to admonish you of what you have lost by indulging it; that if you have felt the power of the Word, and have lost its former relish and sweetness, you may be led to enquire whether this is not one of the sinful causes of it, that you do not hear and receive the word with that simplicity and meekness you formerly did, in those happy days of your first illumination.

This sinful curiosity discovers itself, in being more captivated with the *manner*, than the *matter* of the word preached. There is a natural levity in our fallen minds, and a disposition to be pleased with the appearance of things.

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This the serious mind often discovers in itself while hearing the word: it is suddenly captivated and moved by something extrinsic to the truth and excellency of the word itself. A rhetorical flourish, a smart saying, a particular motion of the speaker, shall often effect that, which the more solid and powerful demonstration of the word does not: these things easily affect the passions; and make a more lasting impression on the memory. Our minds are like a sieve, the good slips easily from us, and we retain that which is either evil, or merely speculative or ornamental in the delivery of the word. The variety of gifts; the diversity of operations; and the peculiarities that are to be found in the servants of Christ, is an evidence of the divine wisdom which promotes the same end by a diversity of means; and no doubt they have their use in the church, we are hereby adapted to the different habits of the human mind. But these external things were never intended to serve the place of truth, as many curious hearers make them. God appointed the beautiful garments, the bells and pomgranates of the high-priest; and, as typical things, they had their use; but they were never intended to veil the dignity and glory of the priesthood; and yet many undoubtedly beheld these things with curious speculations; their minds rested in them, and did not penetrate into the mysterious things of grace contained therein, and altho' such a shewy worship is replaced by one more simple, the danger of mistaking the shadow for the substance is not the less. There is a secret enmity in our minds against the *power* and *spirituality* of truth; many can bear the beautiful picture of it, and yet live strangers to its vital principle. Let us pray, dear Brethren, that we may be enabled to distinguish between the precious food, and the mode of its communication, that we may hear the word of God meekly and fiducially, and remember that our attention being kept up, by any peculiarities of the speaker, is only in subserviency to the conscience being awakened and reprov'd, the judgment informed, and the affections and passions being exerted in the cause of truth. The great end of preaching is, not that we may be entertained or diverted; but that imaginations may be cast down, and every thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, be brought into captivity to the obedience of Jesus Christ. It's the sword of the spirit  
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that must slay our corruptions and unbelief, and not the ornaments and appendages that may be hung about it.

Another evidence of this sinful curiosity, is when we love any thing *mysterious or novel*, in hearing of the word: the itch of many hearers in this day: Athenian levity! It is a saying of *Bishop Reynolds*, that "He had rather be the heir of truth, than the author of heresy"; but these had rather be the hearers of heresy for the novelty of it, than the truth for the antiquity of it. It is a matter of lamentation, what mischief this spirit has produced in the Churches. It has unsettled the minds of many; deprived them of the greatest ornament of their Christian profession, that of a meek and quiet spirit; made those that were peaceable humble members of Christian churches, capious, critical, quarrellsome, to the great hindrance of many seeking souls, and the stumbling block of mere professors, who have concluded by this, there is nothing satisfactory and permanent in religion; when those who have been so zealous for its truths, have fallen out with their former sentiments, and with those who were of the same mind themselves were. And yet after all, that which has taken place in their minds, is not the effect of any superior illumination or conviction of truth; but the pride and unsteadiness of the mind. And hence the temporary popularity, and external prosperity of some preachers: they are popular, because they affect to be wiser than many of their brethren, and their hearers mistake shadow for substance, and mere loquacity and battology for a great depth of judgment, and superior discernment. They can see things clearer, have a distinct system, are more consistent, rational, and scriptural than others; and yet all this is often the love of novelty and mystery, it is spiritual affectation, not christian humility. Truth is venerable, because it is antique. Error is hateful, because it is novel. It is like stinking fish, (says one), it should have been eaten while it was fresh. Real christianity is as old as the fall. It is substantial truth, upon which we may rest our souls. The love of novelty and mystery is the effect of an airy, self-sufficient mind, puffed up with its own conceits, and not humbled with the glorious truths of revelation, clearly manifested, as to the substance of them, to the weakest, as well as the strongest believer.

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God has not left it to us to make discoveries in divine things; they are dispositions of his own eternal mind, immutable in their nature, shining in the book of scripture with a radiance that dazzles our eyes. When any therefore brethren, would draw away your mind from the simplicity of the truth to something novel in religion, it is a sufficient reason for you to suspect a snare. "Stand in the paths, ask for the good old way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls." The love of novelty never rests in one place.

Dissatisfaction with *the gifts* and *ministry* of those we have formerly heard, and the places in which we have been blessed, is another symptom of this reprobable temper of mind. It is indeed, the highest kind of ingratitude, to be unmindful of those, who under God, have been our spiritual fathers and assistants; and it can be owing to nothing else but this sinful evil habit, that we can prefer others, without some great defect or incapacity in those we have benefited from. We are not condemning occasional hearing in other places, and other persons. No scripture abridges us of our liberty in this respect. We may, as industrious bees, collect honey from every flower; but we should remember not to forsake our own hive, merely because we have happened to hear a new preacher that has arrested our passions.

Mr. *Nehemiah Rogers*, in his parable of the lost groat, observes. "I cannot by any means approve of people's *ordinary* leaving their own pastor, he being a man, whose gifts are approved of by the church, and one who is conscionable in his place, and of a holy life; tho' his gifts are far inferior to the gifts of others, for all Gods servants are not alike gifted, some have five talents, some but two, some but one, *Matt.* xxv. 15. And yet all are God's faithful servants, and have their gifts given to profit withal, *1 Cor.* xii. 7. For ye may all prophecy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted. *1 Cor.* xiv. 31. Tell me not that change of pasture makes fat calves, (for still you graunt they remain calves,) I am sure change of ministers make lean souls; who thrive more in grace than they that conscionably attend to their own godly pastors? And who grow slowest but they that heap unto themselves a multitude of teachers"? *Rogers* on the lost groat, page, 143. What this good man says on this subject, is *ordinarily* and *curiously*

ously leaving our places, and not intended to preclude our occasionally and necessarily hearing others, for our profit.

It is not sinful to change our place and pastor, provided our greater profit is thereby promoted; but it is sinful to grieve the minds of our pastors, merely to gratify our curiosity. Remember them which have the rule over you. *Heb. xiii. 7.* And esteem them highly for their works sake. Their comfort and prosperity are yours.

To hear the word as a kind of *diversion* and *entertainment*, proceeds from the same corrupt mind. Such sit in our pews and galleries, as spectators at the theatres. And it is not uncommon to hear such, with an air of indifference, to pass such frivolous compliments between each other, on their way home. "He preached well. He is a fine orator. His language is good. He speaks with much propriety." Had such been hearers of Chrysostom, they had clapped their hands at the end of the sermon, as we are informed some of his hearers did. Let us remember that we hear for higher ends, than to gratify our eyes and ears. The word is intended to make us believe better; to hope with more assurance; to pray with more *pathos*; with more constancy and regularity. Dear brethren may it be impressed on our minds, that tho' hearing the word is a short temporary action of the mind and body, the consequences of it to us are of an eternal nature, it either aggravates our damnation, or promotes our salvation; solemn thoughts! Impress it O Lord on all our minds!

Take heed therefore how you hear, that the gospel may become the power of God to your salvation, that the seed may be received into honest and good hearts, bringing forth fruit meet for him by whom the ground is dressed. To hear it in a curious temper of mind, is a perfect contrast to that spirit, which is required in our attendance upon it. We are to come under the word in the spirit of a little child, *Luke xviii. 17.* As new born babes, to desire the sincere milk of it, *1 Pet. ii. 2.* to tremble in hearing of it, *Isa. lxvi. 2.* If faithful ministers are with you in meekness and fear, and much trembling, you should pray that you may receive it in the same spirit, in which it is delivered; they are the most profitable times under the word, when we can set ourselves before God, as the great searcher of hearts, sensible of the inefficacy of all persons, places, and means without his blessing, looking at Jehovah Jesus, as  
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the great object of the word; the matter of it the bread of life; the design of it our everlasting salvation; and the preacher of it the voice of one crying in the wilderness.

Such a sinful curiosity, is a levity of mind incongruous to the time, place, design, and company present at preaching the word of God. Would you have been a curious spectator at Sinai, when the Lord descended upon it in fire, and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly, so that all the people in the camp trembled? *Ex. xix. 16. 18.* Would you have been making critical remarks, had you been present with Isaiah, when he had a vision of the glory of Christ in his church, and he cried out, Wo is me, I am undone, for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts? *Isa. vi. 5.* And had we faith in exercise at these times, we should likewise be impressed with a solemn sense of the divine presence, and exclaim with Jacob, This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven, *Gen. xxviii. 17!* It is the time of Christ's sitting in judgment, on the states and conditions of men. *Heb. iv. 12, 13.* Is it then a time for pleasing our imaginations, our eyes, and ears, when we ought to be labouring to affect our hearts?

The place is now consecrated and solemnized, by the special authority and presence of Christ. The design of this ordinance, is to exhibit truth to the mind, that it may be transformed into its likeness. And it is a spectacle of no less a company than God, Angels, and Men, convened together to promote the greatest design of infinite wisdom. *1 Cor. i. 21.* Should our conduct, at such a time, and in such a place, be like those curious hearers mentioned? *Ez. 33. 32.*

Such a manner of hearing has been, and is productive of many evils in the churches of Christ. The example of it has infected many, and nothing is more common than to see and find many professors, of whom it may be said, and that without uncharitable words; that they have little or nothing of Christianity about them, than that they are hearers of the word. They are the butterflies of the day, running from place to place; fatiguing their bodies; discomposing their minds; disordering their families; grieving

ing the spirit of the more solid Christian; and hurting the minds of their own faithful and affectionate pastors, should they, (which is not very common,) belong to some Christian church or society.

A sudden conflux of many such hearers often appears under a popular preacher. The stated preacher of the place, feels his own diminutiveness on the occasion, and is ready to exclaim, Who are these, and from whence came they? On stated occasions for prayer, and preaching the word, they are not to be seen for weeks together; but on this occasion of satisfying their curiosity, they think it their duty to attend. I know this is a tender place; and shall therefore observe, that tho' it is our duty to honor Christ's eminent and popular servants, it is as much so, to honor Christ's institutions, and whoever they are, that take the lead in them. Christ has not left us, to select whom we please to honor, nor any where given us a licence to repair to his courts till an opportunity offers of pleasing ourselves; but has made it our duty to esteem all his ministers for their works' sake: and we can have no reason to expect a blessing under a popular preacher, while we are neglecting and slighting one of inferior gifts, at least, such as we think fit to esteem so. For, "There is nothing in the world but what may in the knowledge and use of it, add something to our perfection and understanding." *Hooker's Ecc. pol. lib. 1. p. 76.*

Thus, dear brethren, we have endeavoured to lay before you, what we conceive to be a sinful temper of mind, in many hearers of the word, and there needs no other apology, for any thing advanced, than that such an evil exists. May the Lord make us watchful over it in ourselves, and enable us all to hear the word, and receive it as new born babes, that we may grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

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*Signed in behalf of the whole, by*

RICHARD LEGGETT.